WAS A DERELICT; NOW HE'S CRUISER AMONG COLLEGE MEN

Ted Mercer, Who Followed the Primrose Path as a College Youth and Later Found It Lined with Poison Ivy, "Came Back," and His Business Now Is Helping College Men in Danger or Trouble—Men of National Repute Back His Campaign and He Talks Morals to 75,000 Young Men Yearly.

E. C. Mercer

DOWN in the famous old McAuley Water Street Mission, where many a rum-soaked derelict has sought shelter from the cold and consolation in the sympathy of those who were in a position to understand him, Ted Mercer came to the conclusion that he was at the brink of the cliff. It was one step to go over, and many weary miles of fighting to go back.

Fifteen years before he had left his home in Savannah, Ga., to enter the University of Virginia. Back of him he had a family that for generations had played a prominent part in the history of the United States. He had money and social prestige and a personality that instantly brought him into popularity at the university. But when he drifted into the McAuley Mission he was homeless and penniless. His last "jitney" had been spent in a Bowery saloon.

There, for the first time, he became really conscious of what he had made of himself. Seized with a desperate desire to change his ways, he began the long fight to regain his footing. He conquered, and the world will probably be benefited more by the fact that he went down and came up than if he had always remained up.

A WELCOME VISITOR IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF THE EAST.

Each year Mr. Mercer talks to 75,000 college men on the subject of morals. He is welcomed at every large college in the East by men who have reached the summits in the educational world and who yet realize their own inability to reach the hearts of reckless college boys. He talks to them as a man and a gentleman—as one who has been through the mill and who knows by experience what he is talking about. The editor of one college paper expressed his thoughts on the occasion of a visit from Mr. Mercer by saying: "Mr. Mercer took a long trip down the primrose path and found that it was lined with poison ivy on both sides. Now he has come back to tell us what we may expect if we venture too far."

And if ever a man who has survived a life of the worst kind of dissipation does know what he is talking about it is Mr. Mercer. When he left his home in Savannah he had every advantage that a young man can have. At the University of Virginia he became a leader in the social and athletic life. He joined one of the largest national fraternities, and was honored by membership in two social clubs and the senior society. But the hearty good fellowship of college life proved too much for him. As his popularity increased he became more and more of a figure at the student drinking resorts near the college. The habit grew upon him, and in the excess of youthful spirits he turned his hand to gambling. Like many another college man he intended to swear off his bad habits when he left college. But when it came time to swear off he found that the habits he had contracted amounted to more in his life than he anticipated. To live without excesses was dull and uninteresting.

After graduation Mercer returned to his home and soon became a leader in the social life of Savannah. The habits of his college days became stronger and the mild pleasures of society became less able to satisfy his desire for excitement. Gradually he took up with a more worldly crowd. A year or so brought social ostracism, and his family in despa[illegible]ent the young man to Wilmington, Del., where he was given a place as a clerk in the Du Pont Powder Company.

Things went fairly well for a short time and then Mercer began to exhibit his old traits once more. One day he was called into the office of W. A. Layfield and told that the company would dispense with his services. His plea to be allowed to remain until the end of the month so that he might resign was not successful.

"I won't have you around here fifteen minutes longer," Mr. Layfield told him. "You are a bad example for the other clerks."

It is an odd fact that the two men met fourteen years later on a Pullman car bound for the West. Mr. Layfield, now connected with the Atlas Powder Company, recognized Mr. Mercer instantly, and the interview that took place between them was vastly different from the one in the Du Pont company's offices.

"I've heard of your wonderful work, Mr. Mercer," he said, "and I want to congratulate you. My son is going to Princeton next fall, and during the summer I'm going to send him up to New York to have a talk with you. Give it to him straight from the shoulder."

THE TWO DEBAUCHEES GOING THE PACE IN PHILADELPHIA.

From Wilmington Mercer went to Harrisburg and then to Philadelphia. There his money gave out and he drifted about until he ran into another college man from Savannah, who was in much the same fix. Both of them were going the route and both of them were on their uppers. The spree there lasted as long as they could impose on former friends to provide them with money, and then they parted. The other man later committed suicide while drunk.

Mercer then went to Trenton, N. J., where he found life without working was equally hard. Trenton is in Mercer County, named after his great-grandfather, General Hugh Mercer, who was killed there in the Battle of Princeton. People laughed when he told them that he was the descendant of General Mercer, and he was refused even a job as a common laborer.

While he was loafing about the streets he ran into an old friend, who scarcely recognized the debonair youth of a few years previous. This friend gave him $5 on condition that he would go to New York and try to make another start. Mercer took the $5 thankfully and in return gave many promises—but the money went over Trenton bars for more cheap whiskey.

FRIENDS AND BORROWED PROSPERITY AND THE BOWERY.

Finally, however, he did make his way to New York. Here he found a host of friends who willingly staked him to enough money to make himself presentable. Borrowed prosperity went well enough for a time, but as he showed no signs of doing anything but keeping up the drain on his friends' pocketbooks he was soon dropped, and once again he was confronted with the problem of shifting for himself. The fusil oil they call whiskey on the Bowery sells for five cents a glass, and naturally Mercer gravitated to the section where he could get it for the least money.

His condition went from bad to worse, and the winter found him poorly clad and sick. What money he could scrape together by doing odd jobs went over the bars for more drink. He became a figure in the bread lines that formed each day. Finally he went to the McAuley Mission, 316 Water st., where he was inspired to try and make the uphill fight. He went there merely because he was sick, cold and utterly wretched, but as he sat listening to the nightly talk it entered into his dulled brain that even he might come back and make a man of himself.

THE MISSION AND A JOB IN A MERCANTILE HOUSE.

With the aid of the superintendent of the mission and friends he gradually overcame the craving for whiskey and settled down to a small job in a mercantile house. Soon he was helping other men who had fallen and who came straggling into the mission, but he was always most interested in those men who had started on the down grade while they were in college. The number of them that he found there was surprisingly large, and he had a wide field in which to give counsel and aid.

From the beginning of his work in the mission he was remarkably successful in appealing to the better instincts of the college men who had gone much the same way as himself. There seemed to be something in his manner that drove home the truth to these men and filled them with the desire to lead a decent life. He did not preach the Gospel primarily and try to make that the basis on which they were to rebuild themselves, but he talked rather of the advantages of living a clean life for the sake of life itself. Mercer tried to make them Christians in spirit, above all, and then let the realization that they had become Christians dawn on them later. His plan worked, and many a college man who had sifted down to the bottom was helped to regain his feet. Because he was so successful he was made assistant superintendent of the mission. Each night after working in the mercantile house all day he made his way to the mission and talked to the men who straggled in to get a lodging and something solid to fill their stomachs.

A CHANCE INCIDENT REUNITES MERCER AND HIS FATHER.

From the time Mercer left Wilmington he had not written or corresponded in any way with his family. The last they had heard of him was that he had sunk beyond all hope of reclamation. Mercer felt that he had straightened up and that he would forever more remain straight, but he did not wish to go back until he had proved his worthiness beyond all shadow of doubt. It was by accident that his father learned he had made a new start. A reporter by chance strayed into the Water Street Mission one night in search of a human interest story. Mercer was on the platform talking to the derelicts who had gthered there for the night. What he said was so unusual and created such an evident impression on his audience that the reporter wrote a story that was published the following morning. A copy of the newspaper fell into the hands of Mercer's father, who hurried on to New York to see if it was true that his son had been saved. There followed a dramatic meeting, in which Mercer was taken back by his father.

Mercer finally began to devote his time almost exclusively to working with the college men he found among the down-and-outers. His effectiveness in reaching this class was so pronounced that his work came to the attention of men who organized a committee to carry it still further. As a result he was given an opportunity to speak before the undergraduates at several universities. Here his success was instantaneous. He met the men in such a way that he gained their respect and confidence, and drove home what he had to say because the men felt that they were dealing with one who knew whereof he spoke.

The average boy in college is a strange and wary animal. His disrespect for the man who has seized upon vague, abstract theories of life is proverbial. But in Mr. Mercer they feel that they are confronted by a man who knows the truth of what he is telling them because he has experienced it. You can expound the most solemn truths in the world to a college boy, but you cannot make him believe you unless you can win his respect—and they do respect Mr. Mercer. There is no canting or smug hypocrisy when he faces a crowd of college boys. He does not theorize or rant—nor does he open his talk with a prayer.

SHATTERING DELIGHTFUL ILLUSIONS SURROUNDING VICE.

It is a dramatic recital of the reasons why immorality does not pay, delivered in such a way that most of the delightful illusions that surround vice hang tattered when he is through. He punctuates his remarks with the statements of the highest medical authorities and with letters he has received from men who are in trouble. There is nothing abstract or indefinite about it. He drives home the fact that these men who had thrown aside the gifts of the gods to sink until they landed in the gutter were nothing but reckless, whole-hearted college boys a few years previously. Then follows the story of his own life until he stepped into the Water Street Mission and began over again. Without losing an atom of the respect he has so far inspired, he tells of each downward step he took. He ends by saying: "I have no desire to be called perfect. I am only better than I was."

When he has finished his talk every man present has begun to think, and think seriously—weighing vice against decency in a way he has never been able to do before. And a college boy isn't such a hare-brained creature that he cannot reach a sensible conclusion if you can get him to thinking.

APPEALS FROM HUNDREDS OF MEN WHO ARE IN TROUBLE.

"Not a few of those who finally come to me because they are in trouble are the very ones who felt sure that I was exaggerating when they heard me talk at their university," says Mr. Mercer. "They are frank in admitting it and acknowledging that they were wrong.

"Helping college men is my business, and I want them to come to me when they are in trouble. If they would only come the instant trouble starts it would often be much easier for me to help them and get things straightened out. They can always get in touch with me at 124 East 28th st., New York City, and I want them to do it when they need a friend.

"Colleges are getting much better morally every year and a comparison of the conditions now with those of ten years ago is astounding. I think that it is due not a little to the demand in the business world for efficiency, because you can't have efficiency of the best type when you drink and dissipate."

In the last few years many men of national reputation have become interested in Mr. Mercer's work. Among them are John R. Mott, William J. Schieffelin, Cleveland Dodge, Robert E. Speer, Stephen Baker, Alfred E. Morling and William Sloane. All of these have publicly proclaimed him as a man who is doing a highly important and necessary work. On the committee that manages the business end of the work is Francis B. Sayre, the son-in-law of President Wilson.

STAGE CHILDREN HAVE THEIR OWN PRIVATE SCHOOL

THERE'S a little school around the corner from Broadway at 46th st. that is in its way quite as typical of the interest that church folk sometimes take in stage folk as that other monument, dear to the hearts of all the theatrical profession, the "Little Church Around the Corner," in 29th st. This school is at 220 West 46th st. It's little—almost hidden away, in fact—but it has big features and bigger possibilities. To appreciate what it is to the theatrical profession you must first understand that for years one of the great problems of those interested in stage children was the question of where to send them to school, and, second, you must become acquainted with the woman to whom it was left to solve this problem, and who on January 5 of the present year established The Rehearsal Club Professional Children's School.

There is an interesting parallel in the work of the two Houghtons, at the Little Church Around the Corner, and that of Jane H. Hall, who deserves to be known as the founder of the first school for stage children—a regular school, that one associates with the shining morning face and in which the three R's are learned, but which takes into account late hours when the pupil is playing, as well as the road engagements. Jane H. Hall is the diocesan deaconess of the Episcopal Church; that is, she is directly under the supervision of the Rev. David H. Greer, Bishop of New York. That is why Bishop Greer is on the advisory board of the school and one of its chief sponsors.

Miss Hall has been interested in stage folk and their welfare, and has given her time as deaconess to it for a long time. That's another story. But it was her work in the Three Arts Club and her founding of the Rehearsal Club, that by a sort of evolution resulted in the establishment of the school. That's how the church got into it.

It didn't take long for the stage children to get into it. There are thirty-eight boys and girls enrolled, numbering some of the favorites, and what is best, some of the kiddies of the rank and file, who don't get featured, who need it most. Among the "eminent" pupils now getting around the corner at 10 o'clock, when they can, and later if the play has kept them up late, is Stephen Davis, who played so long, to the delight of thousands, with Francis Wilson in "The Bachelor's Baby." Stephen isn't playing just now, so he gets to school very promptly. Juliet Shelby gets to school only about once every week now, because she's playing in a stock that's playing in nearby towns. Sometimes she is near enough to come in to school. All stage lovers know Juliet, who played for a long time with Dustin Farnum in "The Littlest Rebel." Madeline Reynolds, who was Cynthia in "Racketty Packetty House," comes every day now, but "Boots" McVine hasn't been to school for months, because she's on the road with "Daddy Long Legs." Of course, that's the idea of the school—one where the children can go when they can; something not permitted under the regular public school system.

Let no one get the idea that, with all the romance attached to this school, there is anything of a make-believe character about the Rehearsal Club School. Its curriculum has been approved by the Board of Education, for instance, and an arrangement has been made so that the question of attendance comes under the truancy rules. So that there is a possibility of some manager some of these fine days finding that his show will have to be closed, because the "child in the play" is in the truancy school. This contingency, judging by the records of attendance in the school, will never eventuate in reality.

The principal of the school is Ruth L. Smith, a graduate of the University of California and the Teachers College of New York City. Miss Smith teaches the children in the grammar grades. Miss Mary Bond teaches the primary grades.

The course includes, notwithstanding the small teaching staff, the regular work of the elementary public school. Much individual instruction is given, and much of the work is based on the need of the child in its professional work. One of the interesting principles underlying the foundation is contained in the following statement from the school's charter: "Its founders believe in the right of the child to be on the stage, provided it has proper instruction. The aim of the school is to provide this instruction in connection with the professional work of the child."

The children in the primary grades study reading, literature and language (including drilling in reproduction of stories and memorizing of children's poems), phonics, spelling, arithmetic, nature study, geography, writing, music and dancing. In the grammar grades they study reading, literature, grammar, composition, arithmetic, spelling, writing, geography, history, French, music and dancing.

Music is taught by Mrs. Thomas S. McLane, one of the patronesses of the school. Miss Cornelia Landon teaches French and the dancing classes are conducted by Gwendolen Condon and Ruth Cramer.

The story of the growth of the school idea and its relation to the Rehearsal Club makes the school seem all the more curious and unique. At the bottom of it all is Miss Hall's interest in the struggling women of the stage, both young and old. That was the object in founding the Rehearsal Club—to provide good, substantial food to women and children in the theatrical profession at moderate prices and to provide for its members attractive rest and clubrooms and a limited number of bedrooms. It was when the children began to come that the idea of starting a school came into Miss Hall's mind, although the need of such an institution was a familiar idea.

At this point another woman is brought into the story. After Miss Hall outlined her project in behalf of the stage kiddies, Thomas S. McLane, the treasurer of the club, found a woman of means, who has thus far paid all the expenses of conducting the school.

The benefaction is an anonymous one. Miss Hall herself does not know the benefactor's name. As the school is a part of the club, the officers of the latter compose in effect the school board. The president is Miss Jean Greer, the daughter of Bishop Greer. Miss Hall is secretary and deaconess in charge. On the advisory board are Bishop Greer, the Rev. Ernest M. Stires, rector of St. Thomas's Church; William Dean Embree, George B. Hedges and Dr. William S. Thomas. The directors are as follows: Miss Susan D. Bliss, Mrs. Ira Davenport, Mrs. Henry R. Hoyt, Miss Rosina S. Hoyt, Miss Edith M. Kohlsaat, Mrs. Thomas S. McLane, Mrs. Richard Mansfield, Mrs. John J. Riker, Mrs. Frances LeB. Robbins, Miss Mary Russell, Miss Grace Scoville, Mrs. William Sloane, Mrs. Alice M. Smith, Mrs. Breck P. Trowbridge, Mrs. James M. Varnum and Mrs. Willard D. Straight.

FRANCIS WILSON TURNS TEACHER TO THE STAGE CHILD.

Adult members of the profession are taking the keenest interest in the Rehearsal Club's undertaking. Francis Wilson, whose reputation for interest in the education of stage children is nearly as great as his success as an actor, is one of its heartiest supporters. Wilson has made it a rule, and children who have played with him know only too well how he adhered to it, to spend an hour before every performance in hearing the child's lessons.

Commenting on Miss Hall's interest in children of the stage, and of Francis Wilson's also, a well known actor said recently: "It was not every child's lot to play with a man like Wilson, who always insisted that a child study while on the road. And there is no doubt that there was a great problem solved when Miss Hall, backed up by Bishop Greer and her friends in the church, started this school. The question of schooling for these children who play was a problem, even to those parents who were careful to see that the children were aught by private teachers. But that in itself is a problem. It is true, as Miss Hall found with some of the children who came to the club's rooms before the school was started, that they were not being taught at all. The question of the child's education has been one of the chief weapons of those who oppose children on the stage; but the Rehearsal Club disarms these opponents. It does it emphatically in its principle that it is the right of the child to be on the stage—an interesting attitude for church workers."

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Stage Children's School in Session

Juliet Shelby Who Attends the School